



FACT SHEET

Colds and the Flu: What to Do If You Get Sick (Interim Guidance)

Be Aware of Common Flu Symptoms

The flu usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- High fever
- Headache
- Tiredness/weakness (can be extreme)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Body or muscle aches
- Diarrhea and vomiting also can occur, but are more common in children.

These symptoms are usually referred to as "flu-like symptoms." A lot of different illnesses, including the common cold, can have similar symptoms.

Cold Versus the Flu

The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses caused by different viruses. Because these two types of illnesses have similar symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations.

General Steps to Take If You Get Sick

If you develop flu-like symptoms, and you are not at high risk for complications from the flu:

- Get plenty of rest
- Drink a lot of liquids
- Avoid using alcohol and tobacco
- Consider taking over-the-counter medications to relieve the symptoms of flu (but **never** give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms)
- Stay home and avoid contact with other people to protect them from catching your illness
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze to protect others from your germs.

Most healthy people recover from the flu without complications.

Look Out for Emergency Warning Signs

There are some "emergency warning signs" that require urgent medical attention.

In children, some emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- High or prolonged fever

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- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Changes in mental status, such as not waking up or not interacting; being so irritable that the child does not want to be held; or seizures
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions (for example, heart or lung disease, diabetes)

In adults, some emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- High or prolonged fever
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Near-fainting or fainting
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Seek medical care immediately, either by calling your doctor or going to an emergency room, if you or someone you know is experiencing any of the signs described above or other unusually severe symptoms. When you arrive, tell the receptionist or nurse about your symptoms. You may be asked to wear a mask and/or sit in a separate area to protect others from getting sick.

Special Concerns for People at High Risk for Complications from the Flu

Some people are at increased risk to develop complications of flu. This group includes:

- People 65 years of age and older
- Children 6-23 months of age*
- People of any age with chronic medical conditions (for example, heart or lung disease, asthma, diabetes, or HIV infection)
- Pregnant women

If you are in a group that is considered to be at high risk for complications from the flu and you get flu-like symptoms, you should consult your health-care provider when your symptoms begin.

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children also may get sinus and ear infections.

*Children 6-23 months of age are at increased risk for influenza-related hospitalization.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/flu, or call the National Immunization Hotline at (800) 232-2522 (English), (800) 232-0233 (español), or (800) 243-7889 (TTY).